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SUBJECT: Serbia: The Democratic Party's Future Challenge

Summary

¶1. (SBU) A recent Democratic Party (DS) Party Congress in Belgrade provided further evidence that the DS is not doing enough to strengthen its party machinery for the next parliamentary elections. Polling data suggests that the party has lost support over the last year because of cautious and often counterproductive tactics. The current strategy -- built around a promise of early elections and fears of the radicals coming to power -- does not address the real problems facing the party in the near future. End Summary

Sound and Fury, Signifying?

¶2. (SBU) Serbian President Tadic continued to consolidate his control of the Democratic Party at a splashy DS party congress on February 18 that did little to address serious weaknesses in the party's structure and public image. Party elections -- carefully scripted beforehand -- favored middling insiders from the party bureaucracy who fended off a last minute effort by the former privatization minister to add an independent voice to the party's leadership.

¶3. (U) Tadic won 1,880 votes out of 1,931 delegates, amidst thunderous music from "Lord of the Rings," film clips showing some of his more dramatic public appearances, and an overall slick, made-for-TV production. Delegates confirmed an uninspiring slate for the rest of the party leadership, drawn from status quo insiders that had been carefully put together before the convention began. Head of the DS Parliamentary caucus Dusan Petrovic and party fund raiser Dragan Sutanovac -- the main proponents of the discredited DS parliamentary boycott -- joined Vojvodina President Bojan Pajtic (at least in part responsible for the DS's shocking loss of the Novi Sad Mayoral race in local elections in 2004), writer Vida Ognjenovic, and Belgrade Mayor Nenad Bogdanovic as DS Vice Presidents.

Control?

¶4. (SBU) Bogdanovic, Tadic's chief rival in the last party election almost lost a last minute challenge by former minister of privatization Aleksander Vlahovic. Tadic supported Bogdanovic, whose control of the 700 million Euro Belgrade city budget makes him a critical link in the party's financing. Bogdanovic's standing in the party has fallen recently because of persistent rumors of corruption. Support for Vlahovic -- he gave a rousing address and came within 400 votes of beating Bogdanovic -- was likely an effort by the party faithful to insert a more independent voice in the party leadership. Our sources tell us Vlahovic and his group of independent technocrat professionals will likely be punished for their unauthorized campaign. (Comment: We will meet with them in the days ahead and look for ways to encourage the party to use their expertise to help make the DS stronger. End Comment)

¶5. (U) The push for centralized control in the DS has solidified Boris Tadic's hold on the Party leadership but to the detriment of its numbers. A push by controversial party activist Ceda Jovanovic, a key figure during the Djindic years, to promote a more aggressive pro-reform and less nationalistic platform in 2004 prompted the Party to eject him and his followers from the party. Jovanovic, who sees Tony Blair as his role model, was left with no option but to start his own Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which polls indicate has already garnered four percent support in the northern region of Vojvodina, a traditional DS stronghold.

¶6. Even after the DS lost control of the second and third largest cities in local elections in 2004 (Novi Sad to the Radicals, and Nis to a Socialist/New Serbia anti-American populist) it did little to reenergize its largest local chapters. Reputable pollster, Milka Pozugaca (SCAN agency), told us recently that the DS local chapter in Novi

Sad has simply been "disbanded." The office in Nis is also in disarray after having botched a recall election against the Mayor there, an important local initiative that was all but ignored by party headquarters.

Strategic Flaw

17. (SBU) Pozugaca says a trend analysis of the polling data over the last eighteen months reveals a glaring weakness in the DS's approach. Co-habitation with the current DSS government on Kosovo and other issues has been unpopular with the more progressive voters in the party who question Kostunica's democratic credentials. As these voters have dropped out of politics (polls here tend to pick up only those who intend to vote) DS numbers have gone down and the Radicals have gotten relatively stronger (their absolute numbers have actually gone down). The LDP has begun to pick up the most frustrated of these DS drop-outs and could stand to pick up more if it begins to win converts.

Get out the vote, quiet on Coalitions

18. (SBU) Pozugaca says that the numbers suggest that the DS will suffer the same fate as G-17 plus (currently in the government) if it joins in coalition with the DSS before a new election-- its numbers will dramatically decline. For that reason she argues that the DS should not enter into any pre-election agreement with the DSS before national elections as that will only encourage its progressive voters to stay home or vote for the LDP. This holds equally true for the DSS with polls suggesting that up to fifty percent of its supporters are likely not to show up for elections. The numbers bear out Tadic's view that he will benefit the most from an aggressive get out the vote campaign; unfortunately, they also suggest that DS numbers will head south quickly if it accepts least common denominator policies in a coalition government with the DSS.

19. (SBU) The new DS leadership has told us it will move quickly to address its lingering problems. Petrovic told poloff that the election of Pajtic and Ognjenovic represent specific DS strategies to win the support of Vojvodinians and women respectively. Petrovic said that the election of Pajtic, the current premier of Vojvodina, will help the party attract local voters from the region who seek to retain and expand their province's autonomy. Petrovic also noted that the DS has begun to heavily target women voters, who tend to be less reactionary, and is developing women-specific policies that the party hopes will attract undecided female constituents.

Short on New Ideas

10. (SBU) Still the DS Congress did not reveal any bold new thinking. Party insiders have told us that the leadership has decided to end its parliamentary boycott -- polls show it to be a complete failure -- but are grappling with how to do it gracefully. Tadic and other speakers at the party congress focused on the history of the party, especially during the nineties, and avoided discussion of the DS' future or potential political strategies. Several members complained to poloff about this shortcoming and decried the excessive pageantry of the convention and publication of the party's voluminous platform (rumored to be nearly 1000 pages) as a waste of scant party resources and an ineffective form of communicating with the electorate. Many members while optimistic about the party's future were frustrated with the DS's inability to bring down the current government and deliver on its promise of early elections.

Comment

11. (SBU) Overall, the party congress continued to reflect Tadic's strengths and weaknesses. His speech was full of passion and energy -- the stuff that inspired voters during his successful run for the Presidency in 2004. Tadic challenged Kostunica to stop winking at the radicals and to adopt the DS-declared strategy seeking to accentuate the difference between extremist nationalists (SRS and SPS) and progressive democrats. But Tadic failed to define the specific policies that would mark the two sides of the divide and his national unity position on Kosovo suggests he has no problem joining Kostunica in the grey area in between. The election of a conservative circle of yes men to head the party further undermines the effort to promote the DS as a bold choice for the future -- even party

insiders fear the new leadership will opt to protect their own interests rather than taking the bold steps needed to strengthen the party machinery. Not only are Tadic and his party vice-presidents reluctant to be bolder, they see any effort to do so as a threat to their leadership. We continue to believe that the DS is the best promise for Serbia's future and that Boris Tadic can be the charismatic leader who can lead the way. In the weeks ahead we will be working with NDI and IRI on practical ways we can help Tadic and the DS live up to its potential.

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